

Announcer: Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. A podcast all about leadership, change, and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before. In your church or in your business. And now, your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well hey everybody and welcome to episode 235 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before and if you're listening in real time, Merry Christmas guys. I hope it's an amazing holiday. I know it could be a real grind at church and if you're listening to this in real time you're probably tired trying to stay awake for your family. I have been there so many times but I just want to know, I'm glad to come alongside you today. I hope it's been a great holiday for you and I hope a meaningful holiday for you spiritually as well. Hey, listen, just so you know, nobody's working today, we're all off with our families, but thanks to the internet and all the stuff that makes this appear magically without you, we're able to ship even on Christmas day and whether you're listening on a run or you know, the next day or that week, I really hope it's a great season for you and actually a very appropriate subject.

Carey Nieuwhof: So you know, often people think, "Okay, if I'm gonna lead something that's growing rapidly, I have to sacrifice my family, I have to sacrifice my health and answer to that." No, you don't and that's why I'm really excited to have John Van Pay on the podcast for this episode because he leads the fastest growing church in America and we talk about how to be home five nights a week, how to find margin amidst growth, and how to say no to stay focused.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yes, it is not mutually exclusive, you can do both so this is gonna be a master class in that. I think you're gonna love it. So, John, thanks so much for saying yes to an interview and conversation. It's just exciting to be able to have these conversations particularly at a holiday time where sometimes that challenge gets very real in your life.

Carey Nieuwhof: Speaking of challenges, have you checked out the Red Letter Challenge? It is not too late at all. I gotta tell ya, if you're a pastor you're probably focused on the weekend, you're thinking about the new year, you gotta budget, is that finalized yet, and you want to get people plugged into small groups. Oh yeah, plus you've got volunteers you need to step up. Well the red letter challenge can help you with all of the above and more. It's a 40 day turnkey church campaign. It's fairly new actually. It centers around making more effective disciples of Christ. I've met the author, his name is Zach Zehnder and he basically took the time to study everything Jesus commanded his disciples, the red letters in the Bible, found five main principles out of the mouth of Jesus, and the challenge is centered around those five targets. Being, forgiving, serving, giving, and going. And basically churches around the country and increasingly around the world are using this to focus their congregation on the teachings of Jesus.

Carey Nieuwhof: One Lutheran church in Phoenix did a mission project after preaching on the serving. We had a 250% increase in the amount of people that participated at

the same mission project as the year before. Imagine the reach of the 250% increase in mission project participation. Now this is fascinating. 100% of the pastors that have implemented the Red Letter Challenge recommend it because they've seen an average of 40% growth in small groups even in very large churches. It's not just groups. Many pastors of all church sizes are reporting an increase in worship attendance, giving, the amount of volunteers in their church, social media engagement, growth up to 300%.

Carey Nieuwhof: So it's easy to implement 'cause it's all turn key. So what you get with the red letter challenge, small group material, study guides, video, sermon manuscripts, yeah your sermons outlined, kids curriculum, and even a graphics package so you don't have to do the work. It's all done for you. So you can go to redletterchallenge.com/carey, C-A-R-E-Y, to see the church packages ready to go for you and you will save 10 to 40%. Packages start with as little as 10 copies, perfect for small group, up to 1,000 copies or more if you have a large church. And if you need any other quantities or info, go to redletterchallenge.com/carey, they would love to help you.

Carey Nieuwhof: And also, let's talk about your mobile strategy for 2019. You think about it, engagement is everything. We live in an analog digital world. You have people who show up in person and then you have people who are on their phones every day incessantly. What is your church doing about that? Whether you're a large church or a small church or small church, Pushpay can help. They have a mobile strategy that's not only a giving strategy and not just a mobile strategy, it's an engagement strategy. They've helped more than 7,000 customers last year process billions of dollars in generosity and increase engagement in their church.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right now, there's a special offer for listeners of this podcast so go to pushpay.com/carey before the offer expires. You can sign up to talk to a rep who's got some special offers for listeners of this podcast. No obligation, but if you're like, "I don't know if whether this is right or not," just chat about it. He's an expert in church technology or she is, whoever you're gonna talk to. I hope you'll check them out, pushpay.com/carey will get you everything you need for a mobile engagement strategy in 2019.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well now, onto my conversation with John Van Pay and it's a powerful conversation. He leads Gateway Fellowship in San Antonio, TX and a few years ago his wife stood in front of him with their three small children packed, ready to move and she said to him, "John, you're a great pastor, you're just not home enough to be a good father and husband. We're leaving." And like wow, can you imagine that? Well anyway, he changed his ways and now leads the fastest growing church in America, Gateway Fellowship.

Carey Nieuwhof: Here's my conversation with John Van Pay.

Carey Nieuwhof: John, welcome to the podcast. We're really, really glad to have you today.

John Van Pay: Great, thanks Carey. It's a treat to be on. I'm a longtime listener. Really appreciate your ministry and this podcast to me personally.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well thanks, that's always as we were saying before we started rolling, that's always been so encouraging to me to find out that guests may have listened and you know, it's a privilege what we get to do.

Carey Nieuwhof: So I want to go back and there are a lot of student ministers, youth pastors, listening to this or former youth pastors, and that's where you started out. You worked a ton of hours, right, when you were young and starting out, a lot of leaders listening can relate to that even if they're not so young. And apparently that didn't go over very well at home so lets just start there. Do you want to fill us in a little bit? That's part of your story right?

John Van Pay: Absolutely. I'll never forget the day that I walked into my home and my wife was standing in the kitchen with a few suitcases packed. My first instinct was, "Oh, where are we going? You're surprising me with a trip. It's not our anniversary. Are we going to the mountains or the beach?" And she looked at me in the eye and she said, "It's over. I'm moving back home to Houston. You're a great pastor but you're simply not home enough to be a good daddy and a good husband."

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

John Van Pay: She just said, "I'm not gonna do it by myself anymore." It felt like a gut punch. We talked about it leading up to that moment and I made excuses or didn't think it was as bad as what it was, but it was the reality check I needed. I mean it was my fault. I had said yes to every opportunity. Our church was passionate about starting other churches and so I was involved in starting student ministries in rural areas, in the city as well as our church, and just said yes to everything. And couldn't say yes to what was really most important and that is to my marriage, my family, and to the Lord. I was spiritually burning out at the time. So tough moment in the journey for me.

Carey Nieuwhof: I want to drill down on that a bit. How old were you and how long had you been married?

John Van Pay: Right. So I was at that time about 30 years old. So we had been married 10 years, spent about 11, 12 years in student ministry.

Carey Nieuwhof: And how many kids did you have?

John Van Pay: We had three children. Three children.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

John Van Pay: One was a baby and the second, third grade.

Carey Nieuwhof: What made you say yes all through your 20s?

John Van Pay: I definitely felt God calling me into ministry and I was passionate about it. I was passionate about student ministry. It was fun. It was a great environment, had a lot of friends, you saw the fruit of it, it was growth, it was, really enjoyed it. It was a lot of fulfillment for me personally to see the kingdom results, to see lives change for students. I had that burden and was gonna continue down that road.

Carey Nieuwhof: Is it true that you weren't just working at one church but like you were planting other things at the same time?

John Van Pay: Right. Yeah, so our church was starting a new church in a rural area and so I was leading the student ministry in that church so it required for me to be there a different night of the week. So we were doing all these programs, ministries, and events, and she pointed out to me, she said, "Last month you were only home four nights during the whole month."

Carey Nieuwhof: Month.

John Van Pay: During that specific month, yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. Did you know it was a problem?

Carey Nieuwhof: I mean obviously that day you knew it was a problem but like leading up to it, did you know it was a problem?

John Van Pay: Yes, but you know when you serve on staff at a church, you want to fulfill your pastor's vision and expectations. But I want to be real clear, it was my fault.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh yeah.

John Van Pay: I should have had boundaries, I should have said no, I should have. I take total responsibility in that and so there's part of the ministry when things are going, when you're seeing a lot of the fruit and the result, it can be addictive. You throw yourself into it and I was burning out personally and so I knew the signs there. My relationship with the Lord was not as intimate and close as it once was and that affects every other area of your life including your marriage and at home.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, I mean that's a hard conversation. What ... Not everybody in that moment listens. I know you're reading the mail of a lot of leaders listening right now who are like, "Uh-oh, not gonna let my spouse listen to this podcast right now." You know, and that was in part, maybe not quite as extreme, and that was part of my journey too as a young leader, being very driven, very ambitious and thinking you're doing God's work so why not go full guns right?

John Van Pay: Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof: So how did that conversation go?

John Van Pay: I knew she was serious and I couldn't hide. I had to confess to her, repent to the Lord and I said, "All right," to save the marriage, I said, "I'm getting out. I'm done. Let's make a career change." I made that commitment to her and started down the road of at the time there was a no student left behind act given and so I was gonna become a teacher and so I started that process of learning what it would take to be a teacher ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Like a school teacher?

John Van Pay: Yeah. Like a high school schoolteacher and coach. So we made plans to go in that direction but during that time I just had that dissatisfaction that wholly discontent inside of me that God was calling me into ministry and it was during that season that there was a calling to maybe a ministry change to start a church and so that was something that really intrigued me. I felt like God was calling me. It was new, I was thinking, "Oh man, that's gonna probably take more time than being a youth pastor," but during that time I read a book by Craig Groeschel called "Confessions of a Pastor" and he was just so vulnerable. And in that book, he mentioned that he was home five nights a week. He made a commitment. And so I pitched that idea to my wife and she said, "If you can make this commitment, then I'll agree to get back into ministry to stay in the course that God's call in our life and even give church planting a try."

Carey Nieuwhof: So you've already hinted a bit at the answer and I don't know, I've read a lot of what Craig wrote, we will link to it in the show notes, but that is a book I need to read. I was not aware of it.

Carey Nieuwhof: That notwithstanding, how on earth did you think planting a church would give you more margin than being a student pastor? There's not a lot of logic in that statement. I know it worked out that way for you, but like if you were coming to me with that saying, "Hey, if you're my mentor, is this a good business plan?" I'd be like, "Nope."

John Van Pay: Well again, and from my context, when I serve on staff at a church, I'm there to fulfill the vision and expectations of my pastor or direct report. As a senior pastor, as a lead pastor, starting a church, you start with a clean slate. And so you can put the right boundaries, you can go at a pace that is healthy for your walk with the Lord, marriage, and family. And so that was the hope going into it anyway. I didn't have experience, I never did it before, but that certainly was the hope behind it.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. So you know, you're planting a brand new church. How do you plant something, and I mean the context for this is, I think last year or the year before, you're the fastest growing church in America and we'll get to that in a little bit, but how do you do that? Being home five nights a week?

John Van Pay: Right. So these establishing the firm boundaries of being home. We're 10 years in so we've done that, we've compromised ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, you've got a legit track record. This isn't like, well month one is going fairly well. Right?

John Van Pay: And that expectation has been the case for everybody on our staff, our whole team and really for our whole church family. So having the firm boundaries but also majoring on the majors. What is truly most important that we must focus on and that really is our relationship with the Lord and intimacy with our father that we abide with him a devotional life that's not just compartmentalized to 20 minutes in the morning but just that relationship with the Lord and then discipleship for us. Just focusing on discipleship in the way that we understand it from a first century context the way Jesus did it with his followers. And so we're real simple. We definitely embrace the simple church philosophy of majoring on the majors, minor on the minors.

John Van Pay: So because we've done that, we said no to all the other programs, ministries, and events, we've been able to just be focused on those things and as a result we've seen the growth and the fruit.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. So that's not an easy pivot for most people. Can you walk us through, because I mean this issue just comes up over and over again in leadership and ministry in the marketplace. Everywhere where people are just saying, "Look, I'm slammed." You're starting something brand new, you move to a different part of the country, correct?

John Van Pay: Right.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. So you're building all these relationships, practically what did you need to change to carve that kind of margin out?

John Van Pay: Well when we started, we started in our living room with eight people. It was just a small group. Jesus belonged to a small group and we're not gonna get in a hurry of focusing on a worship service. We're gonna get to know our neighbors, we're gonna stop going through the drive through, we're gonna stop paying for gas at the pump and get to know people and so we put up butcher paper wall in our living room and it was just very organic, very relational as we're getting to know people, getting their phone numbers and writing down their names on this butcher paper and we would just pray for them when our team would gather together, when I was by myself I would lay hands on that butcher paper and pray. And as a result of that, the Lord just gave us a burden for them and to do it in a way that ministered like Jesus did.

John Van Pay: So for years he spent his time, most of his time pouring his life into his followers. They traveled together, ate together. He trained them, he showed them how to pray. He gave the opportunities to minister. So it was very much

like that during the very beginning. We didn't have to worry about the weekly worship service or all the programs, ministries, and events. It was just very simple. As our group grew and we did have a launch service in a school and moved to a movie theater before we got land of our own. We really kept that focus on discipleship like small groups, worship service and that was true for kids, students, and adults.

John Van Pay: So that simple approach in being very disciplined to say no to almost everything else helped us to be able to grow.

Carey Nieuwhof: And so that kinda fit into the daytime model of work rather than the never-ending day.

John Van Pay: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof: Where did you come up with that model and can you explain that in a little more detail? 'Cause lots of people ... I would say for sure, simpler is the trend not more complex and simple is scalable. But where did you come up with that model a decade ago and what exactly is it?

John Van Pay: Right. So my experience, my story, I came from serving at different churches that were larger, had all the ministries programs, and by me saying yes to everything constantly, I saw what it did to my life and my marriage. So out of that pain, a conviction was birthed that there had to be something different. Another book that I read, the simple church book said, "Hey, you've gotta have a laser focus, simple pathway or discipleship pathway that you're gonna help your friends grow people and the relationship with the Lord." So that's where the background the conviction came that really did help us just pour ourselves into people where discipleship does happen in the context of a relationship, the life on life. That passion, that focus from the very beginning it became part of our DNA, our culture, and we've never strayed away from that.

Carey Nieuwhof: So would you characterize yourself as somebody who, left to your own devices, has workaholic, hyper-driven tendencies?

John Van Pay: Absolutely. And I wonder if you ask that, does it take one to know one, Carey?

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh yeah, yeah. I can smell that out pretty quickly. And it's constant limits on ... I would just work seven days a week, 12 hours a day. You know that's a sure recipe for burnout. So I have to put all kinds of artificial ... Not artificial but real limits in place to block me like days off, hobbies, calendar space. All this summer, we're recording this in the summer of 2018. If you look at my personal calendar, multiple times a week there's just blocks of time that says, "family and friends." Boom.

John Van Pay: I think that's so key. If something's gonna be a priority, you're gonna put a mechanism in place to support. It's reflective of your calendar because our

intentions aren't good enough and if we're type A, driven, competitive, achievement oriented, we're going to have a fast pace that other people often times can't keep up with whether that be our family, people in our church, those who are leading, and we're responsible for them as well as well. When we look at our calendar, I think that's a great starting place and out of our convictions say, "All right, I'm gonna block the time of what is most important," and that Sabbath, that family time, those weekly dates, crucial for keeping that pace right.

Carey Nieuwhof: So is that how you did it? What are some other things that you did to just keep that in check?

John Van Pay: Yeah, it had to be healthy. Again, my relationship with the Lord was not right. It was more based on works and when I ... I felt like I was almost born again out of the ashes and losing my marriage, I was out of shape physically, you know I was not fit emotionally, spiritually, in all ways for ministry. So there was a brokenness and out of that humility and brokenness that the Lord redeemed and it was just a new love in Christ, a relationship with him, a love with the gospel.

John Van Pay: There were times where my devotional life was not just 20 minutes, an hour in the morning, it was this abiding during the day aware of his presence. I found a great amount of peace and rest in that, and joy in that. That helped me become a much healthier husband and father and leader, just that shepherd heart of the Lord that we see in John 10 how he abided with his father. The more I spent time with him and that intimacy and having a mind and love with him and just being aware, that really became the root, the foundation for, I think humility and that I was gonna focus on what was his heart and that was being a soul winner and passionate about discipleship that really became the foundation that everything else flowed out of. A healthy marriage will come from a healthy relationship with the Lord.

John Van Pay: If your relationship with God, your relationship with your wife's not right, I mean, if you have a lame marriage, you're gonna have a lame ministry. So those things I had to give focus and it really when the right and the credibility with my wife for a long period of time before the ministry and before others that were leading were gonna follow.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's a tough pivot for a lot of people. Who helped you? I mean was that entirely self driven? Did you have spiritual directory, counselors, like how did you make that switch? 'Cause again, a decade in, it looks like a switch.

John Van Pay: Right.

John Van Pay: Again, I keep going back to the ... we don't change sometimes until we realize what something can cost us. And I was about to lose my marriage, lose ministry, and I didn't want to quit. I did not want to just lose and so that change

happened internally 10 years ago. I can take you to the place where God called me to ministry by a big oak tree and a river and a summer camp. I made a commitment to God that if he would redeem and give me another chance that I would do it the right way, a way that would please him, was gonna make my wife a priority, that my children were gonna ... My greatest prayer is that they would love him and they would love the church, and they wouldn't be sacrificed on the altar of ministry.

John Van Pay: I go back to that moment for me, it was almost like a moment where I personally just made a covenant with the Lord. He gave me a second chance. I'll never forget how we started, never. I'm just so grateful every day that I have a new chance, a new day to be able to serve him. I don't take it for granted, that's for sure.

Carey Nieuwhof: It's pretty amazing. What are ... You hinted on this, but just so we don't leave anything hanging, what are the rhythms and habits and disciplines that you follow and maybe have developed in this last decade that have helped you run at a sustainable pace?

John Van Pay: Great question. Our life, our ministry, is not a sprint, it is a marathon. I ... One of your three B's Carey, you like to boat, barbecue, and you've got your bike, what is the longest ride you've ever been on on your bike?

Carey Nieuwhof: I think I've done 75k. I'm a half biker. I just bike to work off the barbecue but it's the only form of exercise I truly enjoy. A typical ride for me is about 30k. I'll go up to 75 once or twice a year.

John Van Pay: Right, so ...

Carey Nieuwhof: How about you?

John Van Pay: 75k miles, that's about ...

Carey Nieuwhof: That's about 50 miles.

John Van Pay: 50 miles, that's ...

Carey Nieuwhof: 45 miles. And with the metric system I can lie. That's like 300 miles.

John Van Pay: Right.

Carey Nieuwhof: No, it's not, it's like 45, 50 miles.

John Van Pay: But that's legit, that's a long distance. It's gonna take you two, three, four hours to be able to finish depending on your pace. But you know, you can't treat it like it's five miles. You're gonna burn out.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh yeah. Yeah, you can't sprint that all 40 miles, there's no way.

John Van Pay: There might be a 70%, 75% of your maximum heart rate, there's a sustainable pace for you. And I think we all, based on our experience, our personality, how God's wired us, called us, we all have a sustainable pace that we have to ... A rhythm that we have with the Lord that it's not ... we're not doing too much, we're doing more than what God has intended us to do, but we're not so lazy, right, that there's no fruit and no results. So where is that place that each of us have to get?

John Van Pay: So for me, it was that, again, everything flows out of this relationship with the Lord, this abiding time with him. I couldn't do more that would start to choke that out. And so something that you sense, you know daily. You know weekly if that's getting out and so for me, that was the foundation and then same thing with ministry. I had to go at the right pace and be aware of what my pace may be faster than my team or my family and I had to be aware of all right, I need to maybe adjust or come back a little bit so they don't burn out. We're in this together. And so that pace is crucial.

John Van Pay: You learn from experience and it's something that, you know, when you start riding your bike, you may not know the right pace, but if you do a heart rate monitor and you compare the actual metrics to how you feel in your breathing, pretty soon you're not gonna need a heart rate monitor, you're gonna know. I think how God wires us physically, he wires us the same spiritually and with our ministry and it is crucial for us to have a good pace and not use the excuse that we're in a season or we're gonna just say yes to everybody's demands on us. We're gonna have to learn to say no and not every idea is a God idea.

John Van Pay: So I think as we mature and as we go along, we can become wise so we do have a sustainable pace to be able to finish and last with the kingdom assignment God's given us.

Carey Nieuwhof: What's your strategy or approach for saying no? Obviously to keep a church lean and simple over decade, a lot of no's there. There's probably a lot of no's in your personal life as well in terms of saying, "Not tonight, I'm putting my kids to bed." Or tonight's date night. A lot of people find that hard and clearly you did in your first decade.

Carey Nieuwhof: So what is the internal talk when you end up saying no and what is the external talk when you tell somebody no?

John Van Pay: Right.

John Van Pay: So internally, I'm asking what is the wise decision here? If I'm faced with a challenge and there's multiple options and maybe one solution looks good, I'm going what is most wise? What will give the biggest kingdom impact? What is most wise for my family? What is most wise for me personally, what's wise for

our church family? So these are questions that I will ask myself and if I'm still ... If I still don't have a conviction or maybe I just want the answer to be confirmed, I'll definitely go to scripture and ask the Lord to confirm it through scripture, as the Holy Spirit to confirm it through an internal piece.

John Van Pay: But I mean, scripture says we can find safety in a multitude of advisors so it's important to have three, five people, someone that you can trust and be completely honest with and say, "Hey, if you were in my shoes, what is wise? What is wise in this? I need to make a decision here." And getting their input and then you kinda take that all, process what is God saying, listening through one ear and then the ear of other people, your wife, your family. Through all of that together, I think the outcome, if you're not trying to rush into it, you take a day, take a couple of days, and the Lord will reveal wisdom.

Carey Nieuwhof: How do you tell them? How do you let people down? Somebody from your church comes up and says, "John, I got a great idea. Here's a great ministry that we should start." I'm sure that happens fairly regularly at least in the early days. How do you let them down because a lot of pastors struggle with that and they're like, "Well, I didn't really want to do it but you know, here we are."

John Van Pay: Right.

John Van Pay: So our church family and our staff, our advisor counsel, we're really on the same page. We have a ... We're able to, we've collectively said, "Here's the boundaries that are in place and we're gonna say no to these things not necessarily bad programs, events, opportunities but what's wise for our church family to fulfill the vision and the mission that he's called us to and to keep our lives right with the Lord and our families and we're sorry, we just have to say no."

John Van Pay: So we use we a lot. Like our advisory council, we've agreed together that for the next year, we need to say no to these other things. I hope that you understand, but this is what's wise for our church family and the vision that God's given us.

Carey Nieuwhof: How has that gone over in the congregation?

John Van Pay: Again, we've ... Our church has grown a lot in the last few years, but we've been consistent in that message.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. So people know ahead of time what the answer will be by this point.

John Van Pay: Right. And out of my pain and my story, I really want what's best and what's healthy for our church family and for everybody. So all the messages became the principles that are there and our experiences, we tried to share because we live in a day where everybody's busy. Everybody has more than enough opportunity, especially for children. I don't know about in Canada, but where we're at, sports leagues and academic expectations, there's an endless amount

of opportunities and you can say yes to so many things 'cause you want what's best for your kids but then spiritually or church or other things can be short changed and we tried to help, okay what is wise, what's best first for the kingdom of God and for the local church and our church family. How can we do this so that it's healthy?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, no, I get that. And I think you do 'cause we had a similar thing. We started a simple church in '07, we're still simple church and making those decisions often and the pattern I would think that I see in your life is you made some personal decisions a decade ago. You've lived by them. You made some organizational decisions a decade ago. And at first, while that might be a little bit hard or a little bit wobbly, eventually that just becomes the new normal. People, even large groups of people, have a way of picking that up and then they know, "Oh no, our church isn't the kind of church that does this thing," right? So there's almost like a self filtering process that happens after a while.

Carey Nieuwhof: But a lot of leaders don't have the courage to get there.

John Van Pay: Right. And we were in a school, we were in a movie theater, and then we got some land that was generously blessed to us by the Green family who owns Hobby Lobby. Great miracle and we built the building and everybody had an idea of how we could use that building as a tool to start ministries, programs, and events but we again ...

Carey Nieuwhof: I've had those conversations yeah.

John Van Pay: But we went in and so we said, "We're gonna be disciplined and we're gonna say no." And so we don't do any events throughout the year. We don't do any extra programs or ministries. We focus on worship service and small groups, worship service, small groups. So discipleship can really take root.

John Van Pay: We have a high expectation that everybody in our church is a soul winner that has a responsibility and a great privilege of saying yes to the great commission so taking responsibility of others, starting a small group, it's part of our culture and the expectation that we have to fulfill that, we' really can't say yes to all these other things or this won't happen. That's our vision, that's what's unique to us and so it really helps us to have a pretty good conviction.

Carey Nieuwhof: Would you have any advice for the leader who maybe suffers from fear of missing out? That's a pretty narrow model. I've read Simple Church, I've read the Seven Habits or Practices of Highly Effective Ministry, whatever, Andy, Reggie, Lane's book, sorry, guys, forgot the title right now. But it's a great book.

Carey Nieuwhof: Anyway, on Simple Church and you know, I get it but that is a very small model. Groups and worship, groups and worship. That's about as simple as it gets. What would you say to the leader who's like, "Well first of all, how do I know I could bet the farm on something that narrow?" And then "Gosh, what if we're

missing out? What if we could grow a lot faster if we added a third component or fourth component?" Like FOMO, fear of missing out, major thing these days. How would you advise that leader if they came to you with that problem?

John Van Pay: I would ask them what is their definition of discipleship? Every pastor will say, "Discipleship is important," but it's fleshed out differently all over and so some think I'm gonna grow people with different programs or even small groups, there's so many different models. Some say just relate a discussion guide based on the big idea, or this video content and then we're gonna reshuffle the deck.

John Van Pay: So I would take my friend who asked me that question, let's understand clearly what Jesus meant when he gave us the commission to go and make disciples. What would his followers have understood? They would've said, "All right, I'm gonna do what Jesus did for three years and then the relationship, I'm gonna pour my life into someone else." Paul told Timothy the same thing, "Everything that I've said to you, find some reliable men who will teach faithful men, that we are to reproduce this." So having a common understanding of what discipleship is through a first century lens of what Jesus, not a western context of content transfer that we fill in the blanks and it's just a lot of information, but again, discipleship happens in the context of a relationship.

John Van Pay: So with that relationship, being vulnerable, meeting needs, showing care and compassion and life on life where you have somebody where you can tell them everything about yourself, that you can confess that secret sin. Do you have someone in your life like that? That community, that context, that relationship. So what has God has done in us he does through us so maybe we're not fully devoted followers of the Lord until we've reached that place of maturity that we can take responsibility for others and help them grow.

John Van Pay: So it's just, again, understanding of what the Bible means to go and make disciples. I would make sure that there's a very clear interpretation, understanding of a first century, Biblical, Christlike model.

Carey Nieuwhof: You, let's talk about growth for a minute. You had a year where you grew from 800 people if I've got the math right to 2300 people or something like that, like over 1500 attenders in a year. I'd love to just have you unpack the growth curve at Gateway Church, your church. Because it took you better part of a decade to get to 800 and then all of a sudden, boom, it's like someone threw nitro into it or whatever. Do you want to just walk us through that?

John Van Pay: Sure. We currently, at that time when we were about 750, 800 people, we were in a movie theater, three services on a Sunday morning, really maxed it out for a few years. We knew that God wanted us to ... We just had a desire to have a permanent place in our community, a stake in the ground that we could grow 'cause we were, the facility became a lid for us in our growth. It seemed like there was door closed after door closed. We tried everything to have a permanent home.

John Van Pay: So for four years we were doing that and but during that time, we would always pray, "God don't add to our church beyond our ability to disciple them." It's kind of a dangerous prayer but it was a good motive type of a prayer and during the last two years while we were in the movie theater we became very lean and we were very intentionally in training everyone. We had the expectation that every single person in our church family is gonna be accountable for saying, "All right, what did you do with my son Jesus and what he said? Are you making disciples with your family but with other people?" And we were pretty honest. We were like, "If you just want to be on the sidelines this is not the church family for you."

John Van Pay: We had nothing else to lose. I mean, we just became more lean. And then, we saw some land, we did the prayer walks, 14 mornings in a row, 11 acres, God gave us that land. So we were able to build a building. During that one specific year that we grew, we moved into our church home but we moved in as an army that was ready. Our spiritual infrastructure was ready. Everyone was trained to be a small group leader. And so new people that we were inviting that we had room for, we were able to quickly assimilate them into relationships, small groups, and again, that has continued.

John Van Pay: That pace has continued and we're about to enter in our phase two now. We've doubled our footprint, and again, our infrastructure is in place. All of our staff are small group leaders and we keep it pretty simple but we're laser focused on our mission.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's pretty incredible. So basically you spent those years in the theater just preparing the base for something bigger.

John Van Pay: Right.

Carey Nieuwhof: For more. Fascinating. When you planted Gateway, you said you wanted to do relational ministry. So you have an explosive growth year like you've had and how do you keep that relational? Because that's one of the big ... I think your church would qualify these days by every definition as a mega church. How do you keep a church that size, over 2500, relational?

John Van Pay: We use terms like we're family, we're home. But if you can't back that up, it's gonna seem pretty hypocritical for people who come into the door and see as many people as we have. But because of the emphasis on small group, when people come, they're coming because they've already been invited to a small group. Our goal is that 101% of our church family will belong in small groups. In other words, more people into small groups in homes than our worship service at our church facility.

John Van Pay: And so because of that, we can feel smaller. We can feel very relational. People are gonna have friendships. And so that's our emphasis. We're very relational. We want people to take their next step to belong in a small group. And so all of

our small group leaders, they're inviting their neighbors, their coworkers, people who don't look like them, maybe different faith traditions, Muslim, we're setting the bar high for them to reach that high hanging fruit.

John Van Pay: But the low hanging fruit, when people come through the doors, we get their information, but by Sunday afternoon, they're gonna have a small group leader knocking on their door that are in their neighborhood, inviting them to their home, saying, "Hey, in three days, I want to invite you, we've got other neighbors, we also go to the same church. Come." And each of these small group leaders have been trained, it's been modeled for them. They're FAT, we call them FAT. Faithful, Available, Teachable. And they're our pastors in our church and we've got hundreds of them that they're not just small group leaders, they're pastors and they've served their way to leadership and this is how we've been able to grow and we're fulfilling the great commission the best that we can.

Carey Nieuwhof: So hang on. I go to your church for the first time, to one of your services, and two o'clock in the afternoon, someone shows up on my door inviting me to a group? Did I hear that right?

John Van Pay: Right. We are not gonna let ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Get out.

John Van Pay: Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons beat us. We have a ... Our long term vision is to start up over 100 churches in the next 10 years ultimately to the unreached people groups who have not heard the proclamation of the gospel. But it's not, we've gotta do this here first. But we really believe our future missionaries and church planting teams, there's nothing special and anointed about the airplane. We've gotta make disciples and reach our community here so we have a vision of every door being knocked upon multiple times, every person hearing the good news of Jesus, not in a worship service but by a small group leader who's been trained that can pray for people, invite them into their home.

John Van Pay: And so yeah, every guest that comes into our church during the service that they're in, we've got volunteers that will put them into the system, it flushes out onto a map and wherever these small group leaders who have room in their homes that are closest to them, that same service, they come to our den and they pick up the little bag that has that name, the address, and five dollars ... It's a box of four chocolate chip cookies that cost five bucks. And so they take that bag and they have 24 hours the expectation and that is to knock on that door. It's kind of old school, but again, it's very relational. We know some people don't want people necessarily to infringe or knock on that door, but the reality is they gave us their address when they filled out that connection card.

Carey Nieuwhof: You know, once you mentioned chocolate chip cookies, I'm like, "Okay, you can come over." Tell me, do you get pushback? Do you get people ... 'Cause you're

right, nobody does that anymore other than the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. I mean, do you get pushback on that?

John Van Pay: There are some who, yeah, they don't want people necessarily coming to the door, but once we say Gateway and they have that commonality of we went to the same church, the same service, we live in the same neighborhood, our kids go to the same school, and I just want to say, "Hey, thank you for being our guest today." Here's some cookies, a little token of our appreciation, and I live right around the corner if you need a cup of flour or sugar, I'm available. Here's my phone number. Is there anything I can pray with you about?"

John Van Pay: So friendship happens. We try to like make a statement, a first impression that we're gonna, our mission of our church is to help friends become devoted followers of Jesus. So it starts with a friendship and we'd rather err on the side of okay, we're gonna make a positive impression in the minds of people and some people may be put off on that and they're gonna say, "Thank you," and not respond, but I mean, we're growing as a result and we just want to be on the offense. We don't know how much time we have before the Lord returns, and we really want to win our city for Christ and we're doing it by empowering volunteer leaders who are saying yes to the great commission.

Carey Nieuwhof: So it's been a good news story over the last decade. But what have been some of the biggest challenges for you as you've led Gateway?

John Van Pay: With our vision of everybody being a soul winner, making disciples, small group leaders, we had the vision of we're gonna have 300 adult small groups. And so the challenge has been as we've grown and we have that many small group leaders, we have the infrastructure and we don't have a lot of models ... We're trying to learn from some but for us, the pain was supporting and encouraging these small group leaders.

John Van Pay: We've had to have layers of leadership so every five small group leaders have a coach. Every five coaches have a head coach. Every five head coaches have a lead coach, and then we have a small group staff. So all that's taken time, but the challenge has been because of the need of the infrastructure to have a coach, we've rushed small group leaders to become a coach before they were even ready. There's greater ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Welcome to every growing church. We struggle with that too.

John Van Pay: Sure.

Carey Nieuwhof: Pushing people into leadership before they're ready.

John Van Pay: Yeah. Before their character, before they've had a chance to be faithful, improve. So that's been the challenge.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: Fair enough. Fair enough. Anything else? How about for you personally?

John Van Pay: Me personally, I think it's I'm very passionate, I've got an ownership mentality, but really trusting others that you've raised up, you've equipped, and delegating responsibilities that you've loved doing but I think for me personally, learning to let things go so I could say yes to the only things that I can do.

John Van Pay: There's a pain in that and there's a great joy in that seeing other people be fruitful in some ways do it better than I can. But me, personally, I think kind of how to let go of something that I'm passionate about has been challenging.

Carey Nieuwhof: How have you done it?

John Van Pay: Again, just delegation I think. You know, we've gone through another growth season where we're doing five services, a Saturday night service and just paying attention to my personal family, my own health, and so we've had to scale back. We've had to cancel Saturday service just because it wasn't wise for us and even though that's painful to look in the eyes of people who work on Sundays. But again, it's what's healthy, what's wise for our church family and you have to make those hard decisions.

Carey Nieuwhof: Anything that's been easier than you thought it would be?

John Van Pay: I think there comes fruit and wisdom with longevity. And experience and you know, I'm in my mid 40s now so I think that once you do get comfortable with a sustainable pace and rhythm and remember that we're in this for the long haul and that there is a rest in the Lord and he says you know, "Take my yoke upon you. Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest." When you lean in on his mantle of yoke and his expectation, not your own, not what others may expect of you, not because you're an achiever and you see all these opportunities but go, "All right, we're in this for the long haul. It's not a sprint, it's a marathon. And if it's costing us our health, our relationships or burnout, then we need to check ourselves," and I think for me personally, I know I can identify those indicators or those signs or flags that things are getting out of whack and I can make those course changes to get aligned better easier.

Carey Nieuwhof: You're a cyclist. Big question. Road or mountain?

John Van Pay: I've done it all but I am passionate about mountain biking.

Carey Nieuwhof: I wondered. I thought where you live it's always a question. You could be a... you look like you've got the frame where you could be a road cyclist.

John Van Pay: Right. I go in the mountains in Colorado. My mountain bike racing bike is a rocky mountain element. Do you know where rocky mountain bikes are manufactured?

Carey Nieuwhof: I do not.

John Van Pay: In Vancouver.

Carey Nieuwhof: So? Okay, in BC, I'm a Specialize guy.

John Van Pay: I used to have a Specialize S works road bike that I just I loved but I have a Canadian maple leaf on my mountain bike and I would love to tell you, Carey, that every time I ride and I see that maple leaf, that I'm remembering to pray for you, but that would be a lie. That'd be ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Well if you do it once, I'm grateful. I'll tell you that. I need it.

John Van Pay: I'm listening to your podcast I just want to just say again, thank you so much for your ...

Carey Nieuwhof: You're welcome.

John Van Pay: Your ministry and encouragement to me, I took a sabbatical last summer for three months and yours was one of two podcasts that I listened to and I don't say that just to blow smoke but I just, I genuinely appreciate your investment in me as a leader to fulfill what God has called me to be, so thank you Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof: Thank you. I really appreciate that John. And what was the other podcast? You've gotta set the record straight.

John Van Pay: Jocko. He's an old navy seal, a lot of ... Not ministry but he takes a lot of military principles from books and he really raised the bar. You know that 20 minute average commute podcast, a lot of people may say, "Well yours is long, Carey," but his ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Way long.

John Van Pay: Like two or three hours long.

Carey Nieuwhof: No kidding, eh?

John Van Pay: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: And that's, I'm learning one of my theories that I'm working on is I think young adults in particular, like 25 year old males, they're not listening to an hour podcast a week, they're listing to dozens of hours. And you know, if you've got a manual labor job, for example, lets say you operate machinery or whatever, you

might have six hours a day where you can listen to podcasts or you know, for people in exercising and that kind of thing, it's fascinating to me.

Carey Nieuwhof: Anything else you want to share?

John Van Pay: Just, you know, I love that. That you said that we can be good stewards of the time that we have listening to podcasts while we cycle, work out, commute, and not only just podcasts, but there's the Bible audio now. I know YouVersion does it but you can get a dramatized version of Jim Caviezel reading the Bible and I've been listening to large chunks of the Bible as well while I'm riding my bike. Very, very, very important...

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: Hey, before we go, tell us about your book. You've got a book out.

John Van Pay: Oh, thank you. Yeah, just released a book, first book called Marathon Faith. Marathon Faith. So it's finding endurance faith through the endurance runners of the Bible. So it's a study of Hebrews Chapter 11. All those who are mentioned. And then my story comes out of that as well.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh that's good. And you know what I appreciate, you weren't gonna mention that unless I mentioned that. So go check it out. It's called Marathon Faith, John Van Pay, a dutch name. The dutch mafia is once again at work. That's what Nieuwhof is, if you're wondering. A lot easier to say than Nieuwhof, or spell. Nieuwhof's easy to say, hard to spell. But anyway.

Carey Nieuwhof: John, thanks so much. People want to learn more. Where can they find out more about you online?

John Van Pay: They can visit marathonfaith.org, marathonfaith.org.

Carey Nieuwhof: Easy.

John Van Pay: All the information, the book is there, me, we're doing a sermon series on this book and we offer free sermons, free small group questions, videos, that anybody can download to help them.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's awesome.

Carey Nieuwhof: Hey, John, thank you so much. Thanks for everything you're doing and we'll link to everything in the show notes.

John Van Pay: You bet. Thank you so much Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well guys, that was rich. Hey there's transcripts, too. So if you are a reader as opposed to a listener, make sure you head on over to the show notes. You will

find them at careynieuwhof.com/episode235 or go to Lead Like Never Before. Just type in John Van Pay, that's Pay as in pay the bill, okay? So V-A-N P-A-Y. You'll find everything there. And also, links, everything we talked about are in the show notes.

Carey Nieuwhof: And we are back next week. Guess what? It's New Years! Yeah, 2019 kicks off. Got a fresh episode for you. Before I get to that 'cause it's a pretty exciting one, just remember, 2019 could be a breakthrough year for you and I would love for you to check out the Red Letter Challenge, go to redletterchallenge/carey, it's a 40 day turn key campaign that can help your church engage the teachings of Jesus and I think you'll see phenomenal results.

Carey Nieuwhof: And then also for your mobile strategy, Pushpay is a leader. So head on over to pushpay.com/carey, sign up to talk to a representative. Get your mobile giving strategy, engagement strategy, and much more moving for 2019 before it's too late.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well in the meantime, next week we are back with a fresh episode. I talked to Jonathan Pokluda. JP leads the largest young adult ministry in America. It's got an unbelievable reach. Like he's reaching tens of thousands of millennials every week in person and digitally and we talk all about it. This is gonna be fascinating whether you're in the church space or the business space. Understanding the millennial mind and even like creating a great workplace or environment for millennials and Gen Z can be challenging for a lot of leaders. Jonathan's an expert in it. He's also got a brand new book that he's gonna talk about which is really all about adulting and how to get into that.

Carey Nieuwhof: Here's an excerpt from New Years Day's episode.

J Pokluda: That night when I got done preaching it was the longest line that I've ever encountered. I was there till midnight talking to people that just came up and said, "I can't believe you said that. I've never heard a pastor say that, I've never heard anyone say anything like that from the pulpit, that was so crazy," and "Me too," and "me too," and "Me too," and "Me too," and "Me too." And so I was like, "Wow, okay, all right."

J Pokluda: And then I told that story. I was speaking at a seminary and they asked me to come and speak about reaching millennials and I told that story and the feedback that I got afterwards, they could write anonymous feedback, was, "Hey, you need to have the appearance of holiness. You said the word pornography in a mixed gender audience. That was inappropriate." And I just thought, Carey, I thought, "Man, here's the deal. You're never gonna reach them. If you want to keep playing that game and you want to keep pretending that you have it all together, you're never, ever going to reach them."

Carey Nieuwhof: Well that was life-giving conversation. Again, if you subscribe, you get it automatically. It pushes to all your devices on release day and, like Christmas

day, you know what, you're probably gonna be busy doing something else on January first, but as soon as you go for a run, head to the gym, start cooking, go on a long drive, it'll be there for you. And that's what we want to do week, after week, after week.

Carey Nieuwhof: Thanks so much for listening. Thanks for making 2018 so amazing. Your ratings, your reviews, your social shares, I hear from leaders all the time who are like, "I email out the episode to my whole staff. We share quotes. We talk about it at staff meeting." Guys, thank you. Thank you so much.

Carey Nieuwhof: I really do hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before. See you in 2019!

Announcer: You've been listening to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change, and personal growth to help you lead like never before.